On the Waterfront

1. Complete a synopsis of the plot of the film. (Approximately 200 words)
2. Complete the following questions. You may need to complete some research in order to find the answers.

What year was the film,” On the Waterfront” made?

1954

What was the film based upon?

on a series of Pulitzer Prize–winning news articles by Malcolm Johnson,

published in the *New York Sun* in 1949. The articles exposed the murder,

extortion and standover tactics infesting the docks, which were controlled by

the corrupt Longshoremen’s Union. A Congressional inquiry, like the one in

the film, was set up to hear evidence from the dockworkers in an attempt to

clean up the waterfront. The movie reflects an aspect of American life at that

time

Who directed the film?

Elia Kazan

This director was claimed to have had an ulterior motive for the making of this film. What might this ulterior motive have been?

Elia Kazan, the film’s director, had his own reasons for wanting to tell the story

of a courageous whistleblower who risks life and reputation to follow his

conscience and give testimony. Kazan, a Communist Party member in his

youth, had testified in 1952 to the HUAC (House Un-American Activities

Commission) against his peers in the film industry and had been subjected to

much contempt and rejection. It was an era of hysterical anti-Communist fear

in the US, and the HUAC, under Senator Joseph McCarthy, was determined

Insight text article on *On the Waterfront*

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to find any Communist sympathisers, especially in the arts community. Kazan

is widely believed to have made the film in order to justify his actions, and he

makes it endorse the moral judgement of one who stands against public

opinion and follows his conscience.

Where was “On the Waterfront” filmed and set?

*On the Waterfront* is set on the docks at Hoboken, New Jersey, and it was

also filmed there, with many dockworkers taking roles as extras in the movie.

Three of the characters were based upon real people. Which 3 characters were these?

The characters of

Terry, Johnny Friendly and the crusading priest, Father Barry, were based on

real people.

“One of the most remarkable features of *On the Waterfront* is the

cinematography, in which stark black-and-white moral issues are presented in

equally confronting black-and-white film.” Explain, in your own words, what you think this quote means.

The style of the film could be called realistic. However, Kazan also makes use of symbolism. What do you think the following might symbolise?

The pigeons

The clothes

The Prize fight that Terry loses

The

pigeons represent for Terry the possibility of flight and freedom and, as his

tender handling of them shows, an outlet for his potential gentleness. Clothes,

too, symbolise their wearers. The windbreaker that is passed from Joey to KO

to Terry is a talisman, connecting its wearer to the struggle for justice. The

fine, warm overcoats of the Union bosses show their swaggering prosperity,

while the workers’ poverty is apparent as they shiver in shabby jackets. The

prize fight that Terry has lost, and that still rankles him, foreshadows his

taking on the Union, with even higher stakes and a second chance to ‘be

somebody’.

Describe, in your own words, Terry’s relationship with Friendly’s “mob”.

called ‘Einstein’ by a mocking Johnny Friendly. Terry’s blind loyalty

to Friendly’s mob makes him unwilling to see their cynical use of him. He

accepts Friendly’s patronage and Charley’s protection because they have

looked after him since his miserable childhood.

Explain what a” whistleblower” is and why Terry felt uneasy when it was suggested that he become one.

Terry is reluctant and uneasy

when the role of whistleblower is suggested to him. He struggles with the idea

of deserting the code of ‘D and D’ that prevails among his workmates and that

has provided him with some privileges. He is indecisive until Charley’s

murder. Rage and the desire for revenge are mixed with the moral decision he

makes to testify.